Employment Conversations with Refugee Communities

A Project of

The Kent Cultural Diversity Initiative Group and

The Refugee Employment Summit Collaborative



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Introduction

The Kent Cultural Diversity Initiative Group (KC-DIG) is sponsoring a Refugee Employment Summit to bring together local employers, refugee leaders, and refugee employment specialists to discuss the mutual benefits of employing refugee community members. The Summit is a partnership between KC-DIG and several nonprofits and public organizations. The long-term goals of the summit are to increase employment opportunities for refugees and to facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship between employers, refugee employment specialists, and refugee community leaders.

The Refugee Employment Summit is consistent with the mission of KC-DIG, which is to provide a forum for small and emerging Ethnic-based Community Organizations (EBCOs) to strengthen leadership, network, build alliances, engage civically, and increase knowledge and understanding across cultures. The ultimate goal of KC-DIG is to help facilitate and maintain the viability of EBCOs in order that they may contribute to the successful integration of refugees into the Kent community. KC-DIG is staffed by the City of Kent and is a consortium of service providers and community members with cultural and language expertise in refugee populations which are resettled in Kent.

To ensure that EBCOs and refugee leaders' voices are heard, KC-DIG commissioned Pre-summit Conversations with several ethnic populations living in Kent and the King County region. The purpose of the Pre-summit Conversations is to facilitate conversations with people who arrived to the United States as refugees about the hopes, challenges, and successes in finding employment in their new country, and, to understand how existing skill-sets and service needs could support communities' economic development. Jewish Family Services is the Pre-summit Conversations Consultant.

Funding

The Pre-summit Community Conversations were funded by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development through the City of Kent's Community Development Block Grant.

Project Design and Methodology

The Pre-summit community conversation committee chose nine local refugee populations, six of which are new to the U.S. and three that have established strong, integrated communities. Those identified as new were the Bhutanese, Burmese, Iraqi, Somali, Somali Bantu and South Sudanese. The established communities chosen were the Eritrean, Ethiopian, and those from the Former Soviet Union. The committee decided on nine questions to be asked of the new refugee communities, and a slightly different set of nine questions for the established communities.

Questionnaire for New Refugee Groups

- 1. Prior to coming to the USA, what were your dreams of how you or your child would earn a living?
- 2. If you could choose any job or trade, what would it be?
- 3. What's keeping/preventing you from getting the job you really want?
- 4. How do most of the people you know make a living? What job sectors do people in your community tend to work?

- 5. What is the greatest need in your community as far as business or trade is concerned?
- 6. What services do you seek outside of your community?
- 7. Which services do you seek where you have asked; I wish we had someone who could provide that in my community?
- 8. Do you have reliable transportation?
- 9. Is there anything you want to tell me that we haven't discussed?

Questionnaire for the Established Refugee Communities

- 1. Prior to coming to the USA, what were your dreams of how you or your child would earn a living?
- 2. How do most of the people you know make a living? What job sector do people in your community tend to work?
- 3. How did the people in your community come to these job sectors? What transferable skills did they already possess before coming to the USA? What new skills did they have to learn to be successful in these jobs?
- 4. Are the people in your community content with these jobs?
- 5. Has there been opportunity for job growth? Why or why not?
- 6. What types of jobs are the younger members of the community securing (those who were very young when they arrived to the United States)?
- 7. How would you advise new refugee and immigrant communities when seeking employment?
- 8. Is there anything you want to tell me that we haven't discussed?

For both the new and established communities, the committee was interested in what the employment expectations were prior to arrival in the United States and the employment reality each group encountered post-arrival. The established groups were asked to share their experience in transitioning into the USA job market and to give recommendations to the new refugee communities.

The questionnaire for the new refugee communities focused on the skill set members are arriving with, their challenges in securing employment, and service needs within the community that could be filled by small business creation.

The Pre-summit Community Conversation Committee Members took the questionnaires to organizations serving the chosen nine populations and, together, recruited participants to discuss the questions. The participants in the new refugee community conversations are all residents of Kent. Participants in the established community conversations are a mix of South King County residents, including Kent. Each conversation had a minimum of five participants, with some as many as seventeen. Facilitators and note-takers were used at each conversation.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION FINDINGS

New Communities

Bhutanese Refugee Community

Language: Nepali

Venue: 1255 Weiland Street, Kent (Sun Vista Apartments)

Date: 9/9/2103

Facilitators: Dhanapati Neopaney, Bhutanese Community Resource Center (BCRC); Tek Rizal,

BCRC; and Clifford Armstrong, Jewish Family Service (JFS)

Participants: 9

Employment Expectations

The Bhutanese community reports that before their arrival to the United States, they believed it would be easy to secure a job. Those with less formal education believed they could find farm land to lease and/or purchase to raise livestock and grow crops. Those with more formal education planned to use their degrees to continue in their professional fields, mostly teaching. All participants had high hopes for their children's academic and professional success. This has not diminished; rather it has increased as understanding of the American education system grows.

Employment Realities

Participants report that the majority of their community works in factories, food processing plants, at the airport, and within the service industry. Half of participants are still eager for agricultural work. Sewing, knitting, and looming were suggested as an industry for the female community members. Doctor, teacher, and engineers were also listed as highly desired jobs to which the youth are aspiring.

All participants were in agreement that language is the biggest obstacle in securing a job. Other barriers include the high cost of childcare and transportation, as well as the lack of transferable skills.

Service Needs within the Community

This group seeks knowledge and training for small businesses. They want information on small business loans and the resources available for opening a small business in the U.S. The group also reports that they seek a number of goods outside of the Bhutanese community including goat meat and fresh milk.

This community would like more skills trainings that will graduate participants with an employable skill-set and connect them with employers in that field. Also, they would like language classes in more convenient locations. Currently, it takes many members two buses to get to an English class.

Burmese Refugee Community

Language: Burmese & Karen

Venue: 515 W. Harrison Street, Kent (Alliance Center)

Date: September 15 & 16, 2013

Facilitators: Mona Han, Coalition of Refugees from Burma

Participants: 17

Employment Expectations

All participants said they anticipated some type of language and/or job training prior to becoming employed, but did not know that they had to secure employment immediately following resettlement. Some (who are currently employed in the hospitality industry) expressed frustration that there were no options available, but to take the only jobs that were available for new arrivals. Half of the participants said they were prepared to take any job that pays well. Some dreamt of being a small business owner, and a few wanted to become nurses or work in some sort of medical/caretaking field. Three wanted to have their own restaurant, as they did in Thailand.

Most participants (15 out of 17) expressed that they were surprised how difficult it was to become employed in the USA. The cultural orientation done in refugee camps (in Thailand, Malaysia, and India) did not address the challenges they might face to obtain jobs. Two participants said they knew it would be difficult due to their lack of language and job skills.

Employment Realities

Employment Sectors for the Burmese in the Order of Most Employed

- 1) Housekeeping
- 2) Food industry (Oberto Sausage Factory, Bakery)
- 3) Restaurant Industry (dishwashing, waiting tables)
- 4) Meat packing
- 5) Grocery stores
- 6) Charlie's Produce
- 7) Farming (most relocated to Kennewick to work in fruit orchards)

Employment Barriers

- Lack of opportunity for advancement in current jobs or working towards better/desirable employment
- Cannot afford education or training to develop skills
- Limited English Proficiency
- Lack of required certification; e.g., a food handler's permit for food industry jobs, a childcare license, CPR training, etc.
- Lack of formal job training prior to employment
- Inability to adapt to undesirable working conditions; e.g., very cold facilities for meat and produce packing jobs, extreme weather conditions in Eastern Washington for farm jobs
- Seasonal jobs that contribute to economic instability

- Lack of personal vehicles; i.e., jobs on the Eastside (Bellevue and Redmond) require a twohour commute each way via public transportation, which is not punctual (see additional information below)
- Affordable childcare and DSHS childcare assistance eligibility rules; e.g., when one parents become employed, DSHS cuts the childcare subsidy so the other parent with small children at home can't get a job or education
- Children enrolled in different schools which require one parent to take them to school

Six out of 17 use their own cars for commuting to work on the Eastside of King County. Others rely on public transportation (which they said is not punctual), and two also have bikes for local commute. Four participants could not take jobs in Bellevue, Redmond, Renton, and Seattle, due to having to be home when young students come home from school. Some have to leave for work at 4:45 am to get to work by 7:00 a.m.; lack of jobs in the City of Kent hindered their ability to acquire and keep employment. Some had to walk 3.7 miles on Saturdays to Kent Transit Station to catch a bus on Saturdays, as there were no local buses that early in the morning. One participant had to walk for 2.5 hours each morning to work, as there were no buses to get him there for his shift that starts at 4:00 a.m.

Service Needs within the Community

Twelve out of 17 participants expressed the following business needs for their community:

- Factory jobs, where they are trained, and then work in assembly lines
- Housekeeping jobs for LEP workers
- Meat/produce processing and packing jobs

All participants expressed further education and training needs, and childcare assistance for families with young children. Due to lack of wrap-around services, newly arrived refugee families are unable to move up in their careers. Those who have been able to find stable employment had no opportunity for their career or education advancement. It is difficult to pay high rents in Kent, take care of families, and make ends meet. Some expressed their lack of time for even studying for citizenship exams due to long hours of commute to the East side for work.

Other services accessed outside of the community are: ethnic grocery stores, catering services, electricians, doctors, barbers, daycare centers, catering services, and mechanics.

Six participants own cars, and they go outside of the community for affordable car repairs. Those who bike also expressed that the service industry in the US is extremely expensive for their pocket books. High hair dressing costs also make them go to other places for affordable haircuts.

Most of the participants want to become business owners for their own community members, and would like to hire and train them. For example, a sushi franchise business in the Burmese immigrant community allowed the owners to employ native language speakers to work in the business. Others want to import culturally-specific food/wares and open community grocery stores. The Burmese need basic business skills to own and operate businesses in the U.S. All participants want opportunities to improve their language and job skills, or get training for new jobs for gainful employment.

Iragi Refugee Community

Language: Iraqi

Venue: Jewish Family Service Date: September 7, 2013

Facilitators: Kyle Wilke, Episcopal Migration Ministries; and Masar Al Taie, JFS

Participants: 8 (5 EMM, 3 JFS)

Employment Expectations

The majority of Iraqis resettling in the U.S. are from cities, primarily Baghdad.

All participants believed they would be able to transfer their education, skill set, and work experience to the USA and continue in their chosen occupation. This was true of highly educated professionals, as well as those working in trades.

Those with engineering, teaching, or medical degrees understood that they would need to pass a certification exam and then could work in their field. The majority of these professionals had good English skills and assumed the process would be clear.

Employment Realities

Although most Iraqis are from urban areas and functioned in public systems similar to those in the USA, the cost of living was a major shock.

Once here, community members realized that the professional recertification process was much more complicated than anticipated. Overseas work experience counts for very little with USA employers, if they are not familiar with the employer. Though all brought over their degrees and letters of recommendation from Iraqi employers and USA contractors, they found that USA employers are not willing to take the time to understand the equivalency of their Iraqi degree and recommendation letters meant little. Those that paid significant fees for degree equivalency found that employers would still refer to the lack of USA education and experience.

English has proven to be the most important asset in securing employment. All Iraqis begin employment in entry level jobs. Those with overseas education are being promoted and feel there is some opportunity for mobility, but not in their professional field. All participants are discouraged by the length of time and expense it requires to work in their previous profession.

Service Needs within the Community

The most significant need for the community is education on how to transfer their overseas education and experience into terms USA employers understand. In addition, the participants stated that there is a need for an Iraqi organization and a leadership team to advocate for the community. Ideally, the organization would advocate for community members and also take the lead on cultural events. There are small efforts being made to celebrate Iraqi culture, like the weekly Arabic class at Kent School District's Refugee Transition Center, but more is needed to unite the community. Also, many participants lament the lack of an Iraqi bakery.

Somali Refugee Community

Language: Somali

Venue: Neighborhood House and Jewish Family Service

Date: September 12 & 23, 2013

Facilitators: Kowsar Abshir, Neighborhood House; Hana Ali, JFS; and Margaret Hinson, JFS

Participants: 9 (4 Neighborhood House, 5 JFS)

Employment Expectations

Before arriving to the USA, Somalis believed that all USA citizens were rich and good paying jobs were easy to secure. This belief was shared by all, regardless of level of education or literacy. Those with degrees believed they could use them to find a job in the same field. One participant reported that she believed there would be no jobs in the USA requiring heavy lifting.

Employment Realities

Somalis discovered that jobs are extremely difficult to get without work experience in the USA, and especially without English fluency. They now understand they must accept all jobs that are available. Yet, even with this mindset, there are challenges. Almost all of the participants ride the bus, so they cannot accept jobs if the bus schedule is not compatible with work. Also, because of religious beliefs (most Somalis are Muslim); many will not work in restaurants that serve pork.

Conversation participants report that the majority of their community work as taxi drivers, truck drivers, in warehouses, on farms, in retail, as housekeepers, at the airport, and as daycare providers. There are small business owners; most businesses are small stores and groceries.

Service Needs within the Community

Several areas of need that were identified are low-cost clothing and grocery stores, training programs for youth with a mentoring component, and Somali restaurants and/or coffee shops. Many referenced the Tukwila community as culturally rich in shops and social gathering spaces, like restaurants and coffee shops.

The community recommends that refugees have access to intensive English language classes when they first arrive in the U.S. Many would like more information on how to open small businesses.

Somali Bantu Refugee Community

Language: Maay Maay

Venue: 12805 SE 275th Street, Kent (Birch Creek)

Date: October 20, 2013

Facilitators: Mohamed Kerrow, Somali Bantu Association of Washington; Bilal Abdallah,

Greenriver Community College

Participants: 7

Employment Expectations

The Somali Bantu community arrived to the USA focused on the educational opportunities for their children, as well as safe, stable homes. In order to support the advancement of the youth, Somali Bantu adults expected to find jobs like those in the hospitality industry, in offices, as welders, or as small business owners. They believed these jobs would allow them to buy a home and provide well for their families.

Employment Realities

Once in the USA, many found difficulty in securing work because of low English skills, lack of education and relevant training. Childcare was reported as a barrier to retaining employment, as well; it is too expensive. Those in the community who are working are doing so in hotel housekeeping or janitorial work in office buildings and hospitals. The wages are low and the people 'live paycheck to paycheck.' The process and cost to start personal businesses is daunting.

Service Needs in the Community

The participants believe that starting small businesses within the community would provide jobs and meet unique material needs of its members. Market stores that sell culturally appropriate foods, clothing, and general goods are much needed in Kent. Similar stores can be found in Tukwila, but this is too far for many without cars. Leasing farm land to raise food to be sold in these small markets is another goal of the community. There are some members farming in South King County and they are ready to expand their operation. Home childcare business is also seen as a priority. It would be affordable and children would be looked after by members of their own community.

From the beginning, the group was clear on the importance placed on education and that they recognize it is crucial for employment advancement. Members requested assistance in accessing financial support for higher education. They hope to see Somali Bantu working in schools and government offices one day.

South Sudanese Community

Language: English

Venue: 1816 S 320th Street, Federal Way

Date: September 12 & 23, 2013

Facilitators: Charles Benea, Heart of Africa Service, BeneAction

Participants: 5

Employment Expectations

Prior to arrival in the USA, the participants state that they believed they would find jobs, work hard, and enjoy the rights and privileges of residents of the USA. They knew it would not be easy, but express that they were ready to take any job.

Employment Realities

The community has secured jobs; many work two jobs. Most community members arrived in the USA with English skills. They recognize that this was very important in their job search, as was accepting any job offered. Community members currently work as certified nursing assistants, as hotel housekeepers, as servers and dishwashers in restaurants, and other types of customer service jobs.

South Sudanese conversation participants report that most members of the community are working, for which they are thankful. The main issue of concern is affordable childcare. With parents working up to two jobs, affordable childcare is crucial. Families report that too much of their income goes to childcare and though both parents wish to be employed, they have to

calculate the cost of childcare versus the amount of income from employment when deciding whether it's cost-effective to work.

Service Needs in the Community

Again, affordable childcare is the primary concern for this heavily employed community. They also seek assistance in navigating government resources, especially subsidized housing programs. Community leaders recognize the importance of progressive employment, jobs that allow for advancement. Training on how to secure progressive jobs is requested. This community is also interested in exploring ways to navigate and overcome employer bias against hiring refugees and/or people of color.

Established Communities

Eritrean Community

Language: Tigrigna, English Venue: Various locations Date: September 9-13, 2013

Facilitators: Naima Abshir, Neighborhood House

Participants: 11

Employment Expectations

The community reports that there was little knowledge of what type of work would be available in the USA. The community was focused on the safety and freedom that would be afforded to them. No one knew how difficult it would be to make a living in the USA.

The male members of the community hoped they could continue to work in similar fields like farming, construction, engineering, and as small business owners. The women hoped to work as teachers and nurses. Those with degrees hoped they could use them in the USA. The youth dreamed of higher education and professional jobs like engineering and medicine.

Employment Realities

The community reports that they adapted quickly because they possessed many skills necessary to get and keep a job in the U.S. Time management, strong work ethic, dependable, self-motivated were skills that transferred easily. The new skills they needed to learn were direct communication, computer skills, and the basics of U.S. systems.

The first generation of men to arrive to the USA was able to navigate entry level jobs and save up to open small businesses like gas stations, carwashes, delis, restaurants. Others found work in real estate and social service. Currently, the majority of the men work in transportation as truck or taxi drivers and in pharmacies. The first generation of women to arrive with education found success in the medical field, primarily as Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA). Many continued their training and became Licensed Practical Nurses and Registered Nurses. Those women with little to no education found jobs in housekeeping, laundry, dishwashing, and the service industry.

There is still much frustration amongst those who arrived to the country with degrees and established overseas work history, because it counts for very little in the USA. Work experience and education received here in the USA is most valued. There has been opportunity for job growth in the medical field, and members of the community have advanced into management roles in the hotel and airport industries.

The youth of the community have done well in school and gone into engineering, computer science, real estate, pharmacy, medicine, radiology, education and social services.

Recommendations for New Refugee Groups

The community strongly recommends that education be the priority in households. The Eritrean community also believes that the ability to read and write English will allow for better jobs; emphasize this with the youth and bring the community together to coordinate mentorship

programs for young people. New communities should work together to build up the community support so that all can succeed.

Ethiopian Community of Seattle

Language: Oromo, Amharic

Venue: 8323 Rainier Avenue South, Seattle, WA 98188

Date: September 14, 2013

Facilitators: Ethiopia Alemneh, Ethiopian Community of Seattle; and Naima Abshir, Neighborhood

House

Participants: 16

Employment Expectations

This group believed that life in the USA would be easy. There would be no threat of violence and citizens could live in peace. "America is a dreamland where nothing bad happens."

Employment Realities

Ethiopians arrived with a strong work ethic, eager to be successful. Many came with experience in agriculture and housekeeping/janitorial work and were able to secure jobs in these sectors. Others worked at the airport, or became truck and taxi drivers, and medical assistances (especially in nursing homes). Some were able to open small businesses like hair and beauty salons and tailor shops.

Once a member of a community found work in a good business, that member encouraged others to apply. Or when opening small businesses, Ethiopian owners would hire from within the community and/or show others how to open their own businesses. By supporting each other in this way, the community believes they were able to adjust to life in the U.S. much faster.

This group reports that more than half of the community are content with their jobs; they are able to support their families comfortably. The others are still in entry level positions, with low wages. Both groups wished there was more opportunity for advancement, but find the outside training required to compete for higher level jobs daunting.

New college graduates are finding difficulty in securing jobs in their field of study and so are working entry level jobs, as well. Those with more focused degrees, like accounting, engineering, medicine, and computer science, are doing well.

Proficiency in English was agreed upon as the most important skill to have in searching for a job. Understanding American standards of customer service was required in order to retain jobs in the service industry. The group also reported that it took time for the community to learn how to self-promote, as Ethiopian culture is traditionally very modest.

Service Needs within the Community

The community wishes for more on-the-job training. They report that there is no time available after work shifts or family obligations to attend trainings.

Recommendations for New Refugee Communities

The Ethiopian community recommends that new groups go to school par- time and improve English. It is also important to learn how to compete and self-promote in the American style. New

refugee groups should try different things and network with people outside their respective communities. Finally, they believe that learning English faster will increase opportunities for the individual, their family, and the community.

Communities of the Former Soviet Union

Language: Russian and Ukrainian

Venue: 317 4th Avenue South East, Kent, WA 98032

Date: September 15, 2013

Facilitators: Hein Kieu, Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA)

Participants: 7

Employment Expectations:

Participants came to the USA to realize a better life for their children and themselves. It was believed that their employment experience and job skills would be transferable and allow them to continue work in their chosen field. The group says they knew their children would surpass them in professional accomplishments because of the wonderful access to public education in the USA. All agreed that education is the key to success in the USA.

Employment Realities

The majority of the community has jobs in construction, mechanics, nursing, cleaning, and truck driving. Construction, mechanical repair, and cleaning jobs were familiar work and similar to that available in their native countries. Also, less English is required to perform these jobs. The community was able to secure these types of jobs soon after arrival to the USA and there are still a significant number employed in these fields, though now many are supervisors or have opened their own construction/trucking/cleaning business.

The majority of those who arrived much younger to the USA were able to pursue higher education and have jobs in professional fields like nursing, dentistry, banking, and engineering.

Community members stated that having to learn a new system of measurement was challenging.

Recommendations for New Refugee Communities

Above all, community members from the Former Soviet Union advised new refugees to develop their English skills. This is path for employment success. They suggest interacting with other immigrant populations as soon as possible, as this will help with future job environments. Finally, they recommend that new immigrants utilize community resources available at no-cost, such as employment and social services and any educational workshop.

Common Themes and Barriers to Employment

Analysis of the community conversations suggests four overlapping themes:

- Language barriers can automatically exclude refugees from major job sectors; many participants have limited proficiency in English which restricts the type of work to which they can apply, as well as deters employers from hiring them
- Unable to transfer professional degrees earned overseas because of time, expense, and lack of system knowledge. Many of the refugees arriving with advanced degrees are forced to accept entry level jobs because their overseas degrees and experience is not valued. In order to continue work in their previous professional fields, it is likely they must start their education from the very beginning. This is too costly for refugees.
- Lack of appreciation for overseas work experience: Employers tend to value work experience in the U.S., and not experience from overseas
- Lack of job mobility: Refugees must take the first available job in order to meet their expenses. These jobs tend to be entry level, minimum wage, jobs with little opportunity for advancement.
- Lack of small business training in the USA

Other Significant Themes

- Many community members do not own a vehicle to get to and from work: Conversation
 participants report that there are few jobs in Kent which are available to new communities
 and they have to seek employment in East County or other parts of King County and the
 State of Washington; however, public transportation is not reliable or requires long
 commutes
- As childcare subsidies have dried up or eligibility requirements tightened, those who
 would like to work must stay home with younger children; several expressed the desire to
 have an affordable childcare business in their community or to receive training to become
 a licensed childcare provider

Recommendations

- Connect communities with the Welcome Back Center at Highline Community College; people trained as doctors, nurses, dentists, dentists, pharmacists, social works or in other healthcare professions outside of the USA receive counseling and educational services to facilitate practicing in their healthcare profession in the USA
- Develop or connect community members with ESL classes that focus on employment
- For those community members who wish to participate, employment service providers should work with or refer community members to organizations that can assist new communities with a Career Development Plan
- Collaborate with funders to develop employment and training programs that increase employment opportunities for new communities
- Connect new community members with low-cost business training classes; e.g., Washington C.A.S.H. or StartZone.

- Provide information to new communities on transportation resources like zip car
- Provide new communities with information on childcare licensure
- Advocate for King County Metro Flexcar Program in Kent and South King County
- Provide community members with information and education on King County Metro Rideshare
- Advocate for Zipcar Program in Kent and South King County
- Encourage mentorship between established communities and new communities

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Naima Abshir, Neighborhood House, Pre-summit Conversations Co-Chair
Margaret Hinson, Jewish Family Service
Hein Kieu, Refugee Women's Alliance
Kyle Wilke, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Pre-summit Conversations Co-Chair
Dinah R. Wilson, City of Kent

Pre-summit Conversation Facilitators

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Charles Benea, Heart of Africa Service, BeneAction
Mona Han, Coalition of Refugees from Burma
Dhanapati Neopaney, Bhutanese Community Resource Center
Tek Rizal, Bhutanese Community Resource Center
Masar Al Taie, Jewish Family Service

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